

**CITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
PORTER SQUARE DESIGN PROJECT  
MEETING NOTES**

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**Subject:** Porter Square Citizen Advisory Committee (CAC) – 12/18/02 Meeting

**Date, Time & Place:** December 18, 2002, 6:30 PM – 8:30 PM  
North Cambridge Senior Center

**Present:**

CAC Members:

Jane Sauer, Simon Shapiro, John Howard, Glen Heinmiller, David Reed, Al Gowan, Elaine Savorino, Corinne Mundari, Doug Berman, George McCray

City of Cambridge:

Susanne Rasmussen

(CDD)

Bill Deignan (CDD)

Jeff Parenti (TP&T)

Hafthor Yngvason (CAC)

*CDD = Community Development  
Department*

*TP&T = Traffic, Parking and  
Transportation Department  
CAC = Cambridge Arts Council*

Consultant Team:

Jerry Friedman (TAMS Consultants, Inc.)

Cynthia Smith (Halvorson Design  
Partnership)

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**1. WELCOME (Susanne Rasmussen and Bill Deignan)**

Susanne welcomed the attendees, introduced the City staff and consultants present, and reviewed the agenda for the evening (see attached). The agenda includes several follow-up items from the October meeting, and it is hoped that decisions can be made on as many of those issues as possible, so that the 25% design can be advanced. The idea would be to present a preliminary version of the 25% design at the January 30 meeting, get comments from the CAC, and refine the 25% in time for the Public Meeting in February.

Bill reviewed the upcoming schedule, as well as the plans that were mailed to the CAC prior to this meeting (see attached). These plans basically represent the design as it was left in 1998. The specific elements of the plan will be reviewed tonight.

**2. TRAFFIC COUNTS (Jerry Friedman)**

Jerry reviewed the traffic counts that were recently performed in order to verify that the previous traffic operations design was still valid:

- 48-hour automatic counts were done on 11/13 and 11/14 (Weds and Thurs)
- Manual turning movement counts were performed at key intersections during the Wednesday am and pm peaks (7-9 and 3-6) and Saturday mid-day (11-2)
  - *(It was noted by Sy Shapiro that the Shopping Center peak on Saturdays is actually 12-4pm)*
- The 2002 counts were somewhat lower (10% +/-) than the 1996/1997 era counts.

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- A sensitivity analysis was performed on the proposed traffic signal phasing, and it was determined that even if the 2002 counts were increased up to 10%, the previous design was still valid and functions at an adequate level of service.
- Bicycles were probably undercounted in November 2002, due to poor weather on the count days. So, these counts will be compared to other counts done in the area.
- The counts were performed during the Veterans Day week. Data from nearby permanent Mass Highway Department count stations verify that there is no significant variation between Veterans Day week and the preceding or following weeks.

### **3. STREET OPERATIONS**

At the last CAC meeting, members requested that a number of operational issues be revisited, including left-turns out of White Street and Somerville Avenue; bus stop placement; U-turn opportunities; and pedestrian crossing locations between Somerville Avenue and Beech Street. Specifically:

#### **Left-Turns from White Street (Jerry Friedman)**

- Allowing a left from White Street is problematic since this would require that White Street have it's own signal phase (the 1998 preferred alternative has White Street sharing a phase with other non-conflicting vehicle and pedestrian moves). Adding a separate phase to the cycle would reduce pedestrian benefits and increase vehicle congestion.
- There is also a concern that allowing lefts from White would attract non-shopping center related trips. This would also add to the queuing on White Street, and White Street would therefore operate at a low level of service for both rights and lefts.

#### **CAC Discussion**

- White St. already get its share of traffic, including many trucks
- Pick-up activities at Pier One Imports already cause congestion at end of White St.
- White St. could be part of overall solution to left-turn problem
- Rotary at Porter Square could accomplish many left-turn and U-turn objectives
- Lefts out of White happen now anyway, including by police vehicles
- With preferred alternative, left from shopping center will be short length of time. Drivers will know this and continue to use White.
- Should study where trucks come from. Other left alternatives for trucks would be better than White.
- It is our obligation to spread the burden of all issues, may be OK to take some time from peds
- Ped improvements are a main impetus for this project – should not penalize peds.
- Shopping center traffic is saturated now – can't get additional trips in.

#### **Left-Turns from Somerville Avenue (Jerry Friedman)**

- Allowing lefts from Somerville Avenue would require significant geometric changes from the 1998 preferred alternative:
  - A separate left-turn lane from Somerville Ave would be required, this lengthening the pedestrian crossings from the MBTA station
  - An additional lane would be required on Mass Ave southbound (i.e. would need two through lanes and 2 left-turn lanes). This is because the "new" left-turn from Somerville phase would take time away from the SB Mass Ave left turn into Somerville, which would therefore require additional storage capacity.
- There is also concern about new non-shopping center trips that would be attracted to a new Somerville Ave-to-Upland Road movement.

- It is also doubtful whether the short weave section between White Street and Mass Ave (for shopping center traffic) would function as intended.

#### **CAC Discussion**

- Already have adequate way for non-shopping-center traffic to make this move – via Roseland Street.

#### **Bus Stop Locations (Jerry Friedman)**

- Makes sense for Mass Ave southbound buses (77 and 96) to stop at “west headhouse” location. Makes good use of crosswalks in front to both shopping center and MBTA station. Also mitigates the Brueggers Bagels loading issues (loading in Bus stop)
- A bus pull-off could be provided, although it’s not critical. Would cut into sidewalk about 5 feet, leaving 6 feet of sidewalk width at narrowest point. Buses don’t always use these pull-offs, however.
- Somerville Avenue outbound #83 stop was moved from Shopping Center to Galleria as part of the 1998 preferred alternative. Would leave more room for plaza features, and smooth the operation of the intersection. Would be desirable to add a shelter.
- Northbound Mass Ave buses will still stop at MBTA station between north of Upland Road. Also seems to make sense to leave the next northbound stop just north of Davenport Street. Considered relocating this stop to Dunkin Donuts (where present taxi stand is). Concerned, however, that this would be constantly occupied by illegally parked cars due to adjacent Dunkin Donuts and McDonalds.

#### **U-Turns (Jerry Friedman)**

- Possibility of providing a legal U-turn between Porter Square and Beech Street was reviewed extensively in 1997/1998.
- U-turns from the existing northbound left lane would impede northbound traffic, and also have significant parking impacts on southbound side of street due to physical space required for a car to execute a U-turn. (40-foot radius)
- U-turns from a dedicated U-turn lane add significant parking impacts to the northbound side of street as well (e.g. entire stretch between Beech and Davenport)
- Signalized U-turn at Beech would impact parking, and add phase to signal, impacting ped and vehicle operations
- “Double U-turn” (semi-rotary) option suggested by member of public was found not to be operationally feasible.

#### **Additional Pedestrian Crossings (Jerry Friedman)**

- 1998 plan included un-signalized crossing south of Davenport. This location does not impact parking, however it is relatively close to other crosswalks and there are concerns about queuing across this crosswalk, however, so additional options were explored.
- North of Davenport: Impacts one parking space; angled due to Kaya Restaurant driveway. Some queuing across it from Porter Sq. signal.
- North of Allen Street to Bank: Impacts 3 parking spaces; queuing from Beech signal an issue; possible conflicts with rights out of Allen; possible visibility issues with rights from Porter Rd.
- North of Allen to Porter Road: Impacts 3 spaces; good visibility from Porter Road
- South of Allen to Bank: Impacts 6 parking spaces; median refuge precludes lefts out of Allen

#### **CAC Discussion**

- Do not see queuing across the Davenport south location as a problem. Actually may make it easier to cross.
- Concern about the Davenport location is more about when the signal is green and cars in the second lane may not stop for pedestrians.

- Prefer Davenport south location as per 1998 plan. Look at enhanced lighting/signing/markings/other devices to make it as safe as possible.
- Need better enforcement at unsignalized crosswalks – not just cones and barrels.
- City Council is looking at increased fines for crossing violations.

#### **Bicycle Left-turn from Mass Ave SB into Somerville Ave (Jerry Friedman)**

- Still looking at best way to accommodate this move. Are working closely with Bike Committee and technical subcommittee on possible bicycle signal.
- Technical challenges include separation and storage of left-bikes vs. through bikes; signal timing and clearance intervals; signal locations.

#### **CAC Discussion**

- Difficulty of making this turn leads to “wrong-way” cycling down White Street.

#### **Truck Restrictions (Bill Deignan)**

- The City’s Traffic and Transportation Department is open to discussing the possibility of lifting the daytime truck restriction on Beech Street. It is something that is outside of the Porter Square process, since it would not affect the construction plans. This would need to be coordinated with the City of Somerville.

### **4. PLAZA DESIGN**

#### **Operational Issues (Jerry Friedman)**

- Several operational issues have to be addressed before the detailed design of the Plaza area can progress. These are primarily related to where pedestrians should cross the left-turn driveway; and where left-turning vehicles should queue while waiting for the signal.
- The City and consultants recommend that in order to make this driveway operate as “normally” as possible, that a single formal pedestrian crossing be located adjacent to the street edge. This would be treated as a signalized driveway, with curb cuts dropping down to driveway level, conventional pedestrian signal indications, and conventional stop line and crosswalk markings.
- It is recognized that there will also be a desire line across the driveway at the “back” edge of the plaza, closer to CVS/Healthworks. The various urban design ideas to be presented allow or discourage this movement to varying degrees.

#### **Art Opportunities (Hafthor Yngvason)**

- The art subcommittee met for the first time on Monday 12/16/02.
- Various ideas were discussed, including both stand-alone art elements, or art that could be integrated into the required design elements (bus shelters, seating, paving patterns, etc.) There is budget of about \$20,000 for art for this project.
- Consensus was to have the artist work on a collaborative basis with the landscape architect, in order to have an integrated approach.
- There was some thought that the art should also provide some sort of visual connection to the West Headhouse area, since that area has become somewhat forgotten as part of Porter Square.

#### **Plaza Options (Cynthia Smith)**

- Three basic options have been developed which incorporate the operational constraints described above. It is hoped that a preference for one plaza type can be determined tonight. The design ideas are all flexible enough at this point to incorporate the artwork component.
- Three basic assumptions inform the design ideas:

- There will likely be 3 cars stopped in the plaza driveway at all times, and the primary **pedestrian crossing** of the driveway will be the street edge, as discussed above. Other desire lines are recognized with various degrees of encouragement. Planted barriers are shown as one way of channeling pedestrian movements, but other inventive elements could be used for this purpose as well.
  - It is acknowledged that **seating** is somewhat of a controversial issue here. This was also the case in Quincy Square, where it was initially desired to have no seating. In that case, however, seating was ultimately provided which turned out to be safe, sturdy, and not conducive to sleeping and other negative uses. Seating can be integrated into planter walls. Groupings should not encourage inappropriate congregating of large groups.
  - **Grading** will be somewhat of a challenge, since there is up to a meter (roughly three feet) difference in elevation between the street edge and back edge of the Plaza. It will be necessary to take up grade in some areas (through use of ramps, steps, planters, etc), in order to have level usable space in other areas.
- The three basic options are as follows (see attached):
    - A. Option is paving-oriented and facilitates pedestrian travel in all directions. The main path of pedestrian travel could be a smooth material (for accessibility reasons) while other areas could be special paving (dependent on budget). Art could be integrated into the overall design.
    - B. Option is more discouraging of pedestrian cross-movements; a central landscape or art feature could be located at the center of the circular plaza.
    - C. Option is more rectilinear. Has stronger ped movement towards shopping center. It is less centered than A or B – more of a thoroughfare.

#### **CAC Discussion**

- Option “C” too rectilinear – no focal point
- In any option, integration of landscape and art is key.
- Concern that stores in shopping center (but not necessarily parked cars) be visible. Don’t block view with overplanting.
- Visual discouragement of ped crossings at “back” of plaza is a good idea.
- Like all schemes – have clear and distinct paths for peds.
- Likes circular schemes – good connection with dome on top of shopping center
- Seating is very hot political issue
- Plaza will establish the public perception of the shopping center
- Can something be done to improve MBTA station plaza?
- Don’t want clusters of disruptive people – design should not encouraging loitering
- The more paths the better for security – avoid “dead end” spaces (so don’t prefer “B”)
- Concern about overplanting (security issue)
- Smaller of the two plazas will be nothing special – concerned about people hanging out there
- Can newsboxes be controlled? They are a mess at the MBTA plaza.
- Concern about grading. Flooding exists at end of White Street.
- Agree don’t want wall of trees. Will planted barriers work? Existing trees around shopping center are easy to cut through.
- Likes blue lighting at Amgen in Kendall Sq – good example of tying parts of area together.
- “Porter Square” sign is a good idea.
- Pedestrian paths seem correct along edge of street. Round shape is appealing.
- Trust designer and artist to come up with something interesting.

- Is work on MBTA side included? (*Not in scope of project*). Perhaps recommend to MBTA to remove every other tree in the park next to Commonwealth Lock.
- CVS building obscures the shopping center, so landmark feature identifying Porter Square, from both directions, is good idea.
- Don't provide too many barriers to reaching shopping center, many elderly patrons.
- Foliage should not provide places for people to hide.

#### **Plaza Wrap-Up (Susanne Rasmussen)**

- Appears to be strong support for operational aspects and art integration approach. Shopping center should not be screened, and limited seating appears to be acceptable.

#### **5. PUBLIC COMMENT**

- Would like to see more detail on overall planting scheme, including on Mass Ave to project limits.
- What will happen to existing MBTA public art? (Bollards, etc.)
- Designs seem to require peds to detour from current paths.
- Concern about left-turning cars not stopping at stop line.
- Likes seating. Quincy Sq. is a good example.
- Concern about ability to channelize peds in a parking lot.
- Don't overplant.
- Area is underlit – especially end of Davenport St.
- Increase motorist fines for x-walk violations won't work without increased enforcement – public should back proposed "Red light camera" bill.
- Allowing lefts out of White would defeat the new crosswalk.
- Since parking lot is full, should encourage other means to reach shopping center.
- Concerned that new bus stop locations are too far from shopping center. Hard to get home with groceries – sends wrong message to those coming by bus.